

From identity and image to intention: Mediating role of the experience economy in Shandong's heritage tourism

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Abstract: This study investigates how cultural identity and destination image influence behavioral intention in the context of cultural heritage tourism in Shandong Province, China, applying the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model. Drawing on Pine and Gilmore's Experience Economy framework, the research positions the four experiential realms (entertainment, education, aesthetics, and escapism) as mediators that transform cultural and perceptual cues into behavioral outcomes. Data were collected through a structured survey of 387 heritage tourists in Shandong and analyzed using structural equation modeling with bootstrapping procedures. The results indicate that both cultural identity and destination image exert significant positive effects on behavioral intention, and that these effects are partly mediated by the Experience Economy dimensions. The findings clarify contradictory results in previous studies where identity and image did not consistently predict intention, showing that experiential processes are the critical mechanism linking cultural cues with tourist behavior. The study makes three contributions: it extends the SOR model by explicitly testing the Experience Economy as a mediating construct, it enriches the understanding of cultural identity and destination image in heritage tourism, and it provides practical guidance for heritage managers in Shandong. Specifically, heritage experiences that combine identity cues with immersive, aesthetically appealing, and educational elements are most likely to foster loyalty and advocacy.

Keywords: Behavioral intentions, Cultural identity, Destination image, Experience economics.

1. Introduction

Tourism rooted in culture and heritage has become a vital sector for sustaining both economic growth and cultural continuity. Heritage destinations not only attract visitors but also serve as spaces for the transmission of identity, history, and community values [1, 2]. Within these contexts, cultural identity and destination image have been widely identified as critical antecedents of tourist behavior, influencing decisions to visit, revisit, or recommend destinations [3, 4]. Yet, despite their recognized importance, the mechanisms through which identity and image translate into behavioral intention remain only partially understood.

Existing studies report mixed findings. Some demonstrate strong direct effects of cultural identity and destination image on loyalty and revisit behavior [5, 6], while others reveal that their influence is largely indirect, operating through mediators such as satisfaction, perceived value, authenticity, or place attachment [7-9]. These inconsistencies suggest that identity and image function as cognitive stimuli whose behavioral influence must be channeled through tourists' lived experiences.

The Experience Economy framework [10] provides a compelling lens to capture this transformation. Its four realms of entertainment, education, aesthetics, and escapism highlight how staged experiences convert cognitive and cultural appraisals into memorable encounters that shape satisfaction, loyalty, and intention. Although the framework has been widely applied in tourism [10-

12], Its role as a mediating mechanism remains underexplored. Most applications treat the 4Es as direct predictors of outcomes, rather than as an organismic process variable within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model, which has become a dominant paradigm for explaining tourist behavior [13].

This study addresses that gap by integrating cultural identity and destination image (stimuli), the Experience Economy (organism), and behavioral intention (response) within the SOR framework. Focusing on a cultural heritage tourism context, the study examines both the direct and mediated pathways from identity and image to intention. In doing so, it contributes to theory by advancing the Experience Economy as a mediating construct in heritage tourism and to practice by offering insights for destination managers seeking to design experiences that foster sustainable tourist loyalty.

2. Research Objectives

RO1. To assess the relationship between cultural identity and behavioral intentions of cultural heritage tourists.

RO2. To examine the relationships between destination image and behavioral intentions of cultural heritage tourists.

RO3. To analyze the relationships between the experience economy and the behavioral intentions of cultural heritage tourists.

RO4. To investigate the mediating effect of the experience economy on the relationship between cultural identity, destination image, and behavioral intentions in cultural heritage tourists.

3. Scope of the Research

This study is situated within the domain of cultural heritage tourism in Shandong Province, China, a region renowned for its rich historical, cultural, and religious heritage. The scope is delineated in three main dimensions.

First, the research focuses on cultural identity (the extent to which individuals relate to and internalize cultural heritage) and destination image (the cognitive and affective perceptions of a heritage destination) as the primary stimuli. These constructs are chosen because they are frequently identified as antecedents of tourist loyalty, revisit behavior, and advocacy, yet evidence across contexts has been mixed.

Second, the study positions the Experience Economy framework comprising entertainment, education, esthetics, and escapism as the mediating organism. This extends the SOR model, with tourists' experiential engagement serving as the mechanism through which identity and image are translated into behavioral outcomes. The scope does not extend to other mediators such as authenticity, satisfaction, or place attachment, although these are acknowledged in previous literature.

Third, the response is operationalized as behavioral intention, defined through revisit, recommendation, and purchase intentions. Other potential outcomes, such as pro-environmental behavior, cultural learning, or community engagement, fall outside the scope of this research.

4. Literature Review

4.1. Cultural Identity and Behavioral Intentions

Cultural identity is increasingly recognized as a central driver of tourist behavior, particularly in heritage and ethnic tourism contexts. Research consistently shows that strong identification with cultural heritage enhances consumption and revisit intentions. For instance, in heritage tourism, cultural identity has been shown to motivate tourists' consumption intentions in these contexts such as Suzhou Kunqu Opera [3] and to shape purchase intentions for cultural creative products in Luoyang [5]. Likewise, cultural identity fosters revisit intentions at heritage destinations such as Mount Tai, often mediated by perceived value and experience quality [7].

At the same time, scholars emphasize that the link between cultural identity and behavioral outcomes is frequently indirect. Mediators such as cultural values and place attachment have been

identified [14] while satisfaction and experience quality are also critical in explaining revisit or loyalty outcomes [15]. Contradictions persist: Fu and Luo [16] found cultural identity unrelated to satisfaction at the Liangzhu ruins, and in Malacca, authenticity and experiential quality outweighed identity as predictors of behavioral intention [9, 16]. These findings suggest that cultural identity, while important, is contingent on intervening variables, making it unlikely to act as a direct and universal predictor.

4.2. Destination Image and Behavioral Intentions

A favorable destination image is another established predictor of tourist behavior. Studies across Asian contexts show that a positive image directly enhances intentions to visit, revisit, and recommend destinations [4, 6]. In heritage tourism, the perceived quality of site management and interpretation enhances the destination image, which in turn increases satisfaction and loyalty [1, 2].

Yet, much like cultural identity, the effects of destination image are not consistently direct. Many studies find that image influences behavioral intention primarily through satisfaction [8, 17] or through perceived value and service quality [18]. In some cases, cultural values and place attachment act as moderators, further complicating the pathway [19]. Importantly, cross-cultural studies show variability: Chinese and Australian tourists differ in how perceived values derived from image influence revisit intention [18].

Taken together, the literature positions destination image as a stimulus that exerts effects through intermediate experiential appraisals, rather than as a purely direct driver.

4.3. Experience Economy (4Es) in Tourism

Pine and Gilmore [10], the Experience Economy framework, comprising entertainment, education, aesthetics, and escapism, has been widely applied to tourism. Evidence consistently shows that the 4Es predict satisfaction, loyalty, and memorable tourism experiences, but with uneven and context-dependent impacts [10].

In museums and heritage sites, edutainment and aesthetics have emerged as the strongest predictors of satisfaction and intention [11]. At festivals, escapism dominates in some contexts (Ice Music Festival), while education is more salient in others [12]. In wine tourism, aesthetic experiences drive loyalty more strongly than the other realms [20], contradicting Pine and Gilmore's assertion that all four dimensions must operate simultaneously, at Batu Caves, all four Es were present, but negative aesthetic experiences undermined overall evaluations [21].

These findings highlight two issues. First, the relative weight of each dimension varies across contexts, visitor profiles, and cultural settings [22]. Second, the 4Es are often studied as direct predictors rather than as mediating mechanisms that explain how cognitive antecedents translate into behavioral outcomes. Recent extensions show potential: smart technologies can amplify the 4Es, enhancing visitor engagement and memorability [23, 24] while some contexts, such as craft beer tourism, even propose additional dimensions like entrepreneurship [25].

Thus, while the 4Es are well-established, their role as mediators, particularly in cultural heritage contexts, remains underexplored.

4.4. Mediating Role of Experience in SOR Applications

The SOR model provides a unifying framework for these dynamics. In tourism, stimuli such as cultural cues, destination image, or technologies influence organismic states, typically operationalized as satisfaction, authenticity, or perceived value, which in turn drive behavioral responses [13]. More recently, scholars have expanded the organismic layer to include experiences such as memorable tourism experiences [26] or place attachment [27].

However, a key gap remains: while constructs like experience quality, satisfaction, and authenticity have been tested extensively as mediators, Pine and Gilmore's Experience Economy has not been systematically employed as an organismic mediator. Evidence shows that the 4Es can enhance well-

being, which translates into place attachment and revisit intention [28] yet, studies stop short of explicitly positioning the 4Es as the central mediator. Moreover, research rarely examines how the mediating role of experiences varies across cultural settings or under conditions of technological enhancement [29, 30].

Accordingly, this study advances SOR-based tourism research by testing the Experience Economy as the mediating organism between cultural identity and destination image (stimuli) and behavioral intention (response) in a cultural heritage setting.

4.5. Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the SOR paradigm, this study conceptualizes cultural identity and destination image as external stimuli that shape tourists' perceptions and experiences within heritage settings. These stimuli are channeled through the Experience Economy framework, which represents the organismic state comprising entertainment, education, aesthetics, and escapism. Prior research suggests that while cultural identity and destination image can exert direct effects on behavioral intention, their influence is often mediated by experiential and affective constructs. Positioning the four realms of the Experience Economy as mediators allows us to capture how tourists' cognitive appraisals of culture and image are transformed into memorable, staged experiences that, in turn, drive behavioral responses. The response in this study is defined as behavioral intention, encompassing revisit, recommendation, and purchase intentions. Accordingly, the framework hypothesizes that cultural identity and destination image will not only exert direct positive effects on behavioral intention but also indirect effects mediated through the Experience Economy.

4.6. Hypotheses

- H₁: Cultural identity positively influences behavioral intention.*
- H₂: Cultural identity positively influences the experience economy.*
- H₃: Destination image positively influences behavioral intention.*
- H₄: Destination image positively influences the experience economy.*
- H₅: The experience economy positively influences behavioral intention.*
- H₆: The experience economy mediates the relationship between cultural identity and behavioral intention.*
- H₇: The experience economy mediates the relationship between destination image and behavioral intention.*

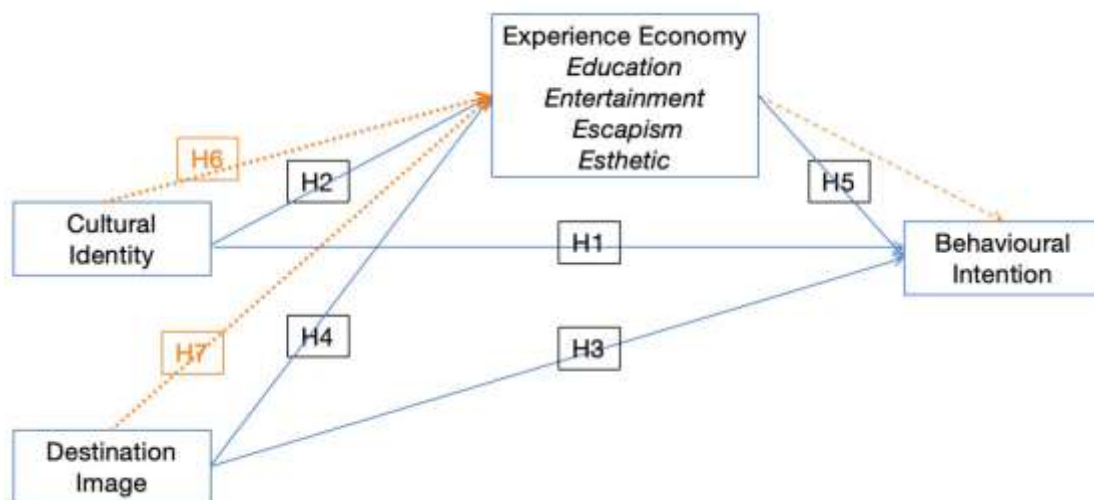


Figure 1.
Conceptual Framework.

5. Methodology

5.1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships between cultural identity, destination image, the Experience Economy, and behavioral intention within the framework of the SOR model. A structured questionnaire was administered to heritage tourists in Shandong Province, China.

5.2. Sampling and Data Collection

Data were collected using convenience sampling at key cultural and heritage sites, including Mount Tai, the Confucius Temple in Qufu, and selected heritage museums. Respondents were approached on-site and invited to participate voluntarily. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed, of which 387 were valid for analysis after screening for incomplete or inconsistent responses.

5.3. Measures

All constructs in this study were measured using established multi-item scales, rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”). Cultural identity was assessed through items capturing the extent to which tourists identify with and feel connected to the cultural heritage of Shandong, including aspects of personal relevance, emotional resonance, and a sense of belonging. The scale was adapted from Zhang et al. [3] and Liu et al. [7]. Destination image was measured in terms of both cognitive and affective perceptions, encompassing the attractiveness, uniqueness, and cultural richness of the heritage sites, as well as tourists’ emotional impressions of Shandong as a destination. The items were adapted from Zainuddin et al. [4] and Hashemi et al. [1]. The mediating construct, the Experience Economy, was operationalized according to Pine and Gilmore [10], in four experiential realms [10]. The entertainment dimension reflected enjoyment and pleasure derived from cultural performances and heritage activities; the education dimension captured opportunities for learning and enrichment through exposure to cultural practices; the aesthetic dimension referred to perceptions of beauty, ambience, and design of heritage sites; and the escapism dimension assessed immersion and the extent to which tourists felt transported away from everyday life. Items for these dimensions were adapted from Mehmetoglu and Engen [12] and Radder and Han [11]. Finally, behavioral intention was measured in terms of tourists’ likelihood of revisiting heritage sites in Shandong, recommending the destination to others, and purchasing related cultural products or services, with items adapted from Martins [8] and Quadri-Felitti and Fiore [20]. The questionnaire was pre-tested with 30 respondents to ensure clarity, reliability, and cultural appropriateness before full-scale data collection.

Table 1.
Questionnaire.

Variables	Questions
Cultural Identity Tian et al. [31]	CI1. I think the local history is fascinating. CI2. I think the traditional culture is rich in content. CI3. I like the cultural relics of the destination. CI4. I like the intangible cultural heritage of the destination. CI5. I want to know about local customs. CI6. I want to know about the representative traditional culture of the destination. CI7. I want to know about the intangible cultural heritage of the destination.
Destination Image Nazir et al. [32]	DI1. Shandong has a good climate. DI2. Shandong is safe and stable. DI3. Shandong has a variety of unique attractions. DI4. Shandong is rich in cultural heritage. DI5. Shandong is a good place for shopping. DI6. Shandong people are interesting and friendly. DI7. Shandong is a pleasant place to visit.
Experience Economy Loureiro [33]	Education ED1. I learned a lot. ED2. The experience stimulated my curiosity to learn new things. ED3. It was a real learning experience. ED4. The experience has made me more knowledgeable. Entertainment EN1. The activities of others were fun to watch. EN2. I enjoyed watching what others were doing. EN3. The activities of others were amusing (pleasing) to watch. EN4. Watching others perform was captivating. Escapism ESC1. I felt I played a different character there. ESC2. The experience there let me imagine being someone else. ESC3. I completely escaped from reality. ESC4. I felt like I was living in a different time or place. Esthetics EST1. The setting was very pleasant. EST2. The setting was very attractive. EST3. I felt a real sense of harmony. EST4. Just being here was very pleasant.
Behavioral Intentions Chu [34]; Koo et al. [35] and Nazir et al. [32]	TI1. I would like to travel to Shandong on a group tour TI2. I would like to travel to Shandong with my family TI3. I intend to revisit Shandong TI4. I intend to recommend Shandong to others TI5. I expect I will visit Shandong in the future. TI6. I would visit Shandong rather than any other tourism destination. TI7. If everything goes as I think, I will plan to visit Shandong in the future.

5.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study adopted a quantitative approach to examine the relationships among cultural identity, destination image, experience economy, and behavioral intentions among tourists visiting cultural heritage sites in Shandong Province. A dual-software strategy was employed, utilizing SPSS version 27 and SmartPLS 4.0, as each provided distinct yet complementary functions. SPSS was primarily used for preliminary analyses, including descriptive statistics, reliability assessment, and Pearson correlation analysis, thereby offering a foundational understanding of the data and ensuring measurement consistency. SmartPLS, in turn, was applied to conduct structural equation modeling (SEM), which enabled the testing of direct, indirect, and mediating effects within the proposed model. This combination ensured both the robustness of basic statistical assumptions and the rigor of advanced hypothesis testing. Overall, the integration of these methods strengthened the validity of the findings

and provided deeper insights into the mechanisms shaping tourists' behavioral intentions in the context of cultural heritage tourism.

6. Results

6.1. Data Analysis Results

This section presents a systematic analysis of the demographic characteristics of tourists who have visited cultural heritage sites in Shandong Province. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed, yielding 387 valid responses, corresponding to an effective response rate of approximately 79.6%. Table 2 summarizes the demographic distribution of respondents by gender, age, and educational background, offering foundational insights into the composition of the sample.

Table 2.
Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents.

Questions	Response	Quantity	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	184	47.50%
	Female	203	52.50%
Age	18-24 years old	33	8.50%
	25-34 years old	122	31.50%
	35-44 years old	101	26.10%
	45-54 years old	90	23.30%
	Over 55 years old	41	10.60%
Highest education	High School	48	12.40%
	Associate Degree	115	29.70%
	Bachelor's Degree	113	29.20%
	Master's Degree	66	17.10%
	Doctoral Degree	45	11.60%

Table 3 shows that Cultural Identity ($M=3.55$, $S.D.=0.81$) was rated highest, indicating strong identification and attachment of respondents to their cultural background. In contrast, Destination Image ($M=3.47$, $S.D.=0.76$), Experience Economy ($M=3.48$, $S.D.=0.76$), and Behavioral Intentions ($M=3.49$, $S.D.=0.75$) scored slightly lower, indicating generally positive but less pronounced perceptions compared to Cultural Identity. This suggests that while respondents view all constructs favorably, their evaluations are moderately strong, leaving room for further enhancement in factors shaping cultural heritage tourism.

Table 3.
Mean Values of the Main Variables.

Construct	Mean	SD	Interpretation	Ranking
Cultural Identity	3.55	0.81	High	1
Destination Image	3.47	0.76	Moderate	4
Experience Economy	3.48	0.76	Moderate	3
Behavioral Intentions	3.49	0.75	Moderate	2
Overall	3.50	0.70	High	-

Table 4 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients examining the relationships between variables. All correlations with Ytot (behavioral intentions) are statistically significant ($p<0.001$). Among the factors, the experience economy (X3) shows the highest correlation with behavioral intentions ($r=0.829$, HIGH), followed by destination image (X2, $r=0.778$, MODERATE) and cultural identity (X1, $r=0.773$, MODERATE), indicating these factors are strongly associated with improved behavioral intentions.

Table 4.
Pearson Correlation Matrix.

Variables	X1	X2	X3	Ytot	Relationship Level
X1	1.000			0.773***	MODERATE
X2	0.732***	1.000		0.778***	MODERATE
X3	0.826***	0.816**	1.000	0.829***	HIGH

Note: *** < 0.001.

The regression analysis presented in Table 5 demonstrates that both cultural identity and destination image exert strong, positive, and statistically significant effects on behavioral intentions. Specifically, cultural identity accounts for 59.7% of the variance in behavioral intentions ($R^2 = 0.597$) with a high standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.773$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that stronger cultural identification substantially enhances the likelihood of intending to travel. Similarly, destination image explains 60.5% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.605$) and shows a slightly higher standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.778$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that a more favorable perception of the destination further strengthens behavioral intentions. The VIF value of 1.000 confirms the absence of multicollinearity issues, reinforcing the robustness of the results. Overall, both factors exhibit comparable and substantial influence, with destination image demonstrating marginally greater predictive power.

The regression analysis further includes experience economy (X3) as an additional predictor, demonstrating an even stronger influence on behavioral intentions. As shown in Table 4.10, the experience economy explains 69.3% of the variance in behavioral intentions ($R^2 = 0.693$), surpassing both cultural identity and destination image when considered individually. The standardized coefficient for the experience economy is notably high ($\beta = 0.833$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that tourists' experiential perceptions play a crucial role in shaping their intention to travel. The low standard error (S.E. = 0.029) and strong t-value (29.504) further support the significance and reliability of this predictor. The VIF value remains at 1.000, confirming no multicollinearity concerns among the variables. These results suggest that while cultural identity and destination image significantly predict behavioral intentions, the experience economy contributes additional explanatory power, reinforcing its central mediating role within the tourism behavioral framework.

Table 5.
Cultural Identity on Behavioral Intentions.

	R ²	F	B	S. E.	S.E.b	t	Sig.	VIF
Constant	0.597	570.454	0.919	0.11	-	8.326	<0.001	1.000
X1			0.724	0.03	0.773	23.884	<0.001	
Constant	0.605	589.681	0.796	0.113	-	7.015	<0.001	1.000
X2			0.775	0.032	0.778	24.283	<0.001	
Constant	0.693	870.494	0.553	0.102	-	5.428	<0.001	1.000
X3			0.842	0.029	0.833	29.504	<0.001	

Note: X1=Cultural Identity, X2=Destination Image, X3=Experience Economy.

The results in Table 6 indicate that both cultural identity and destination image significantly and positively influence the experience economy. Cultural identity explained 68.3% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.683$, $t = 28.804$, $p < 0.001$), while destination image accounted for 66.6% ($R^2 = 0.666$, $t = 27.690$, $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that cultural identity provides slightly greater explanatory power, whereas destination image exerts a stronger direct effect on the experience economy.

Table 6.
Cultural Identity in the Experience Economy.

	R²	F	B	S. E.	S.E.b	t	Sig.	VIF
Constant	0.683	829.663	0.744	0.098	-	7.62	<0.001	1.000
X1			0.773	0.027	0.826	28.804	<0.001	
Constant	0.666	766.747	0.669	0.104	-	6.419	<0.001	1.000
X2			0.811	0.029	0.816	27.69	<0.001	

Note: X1=Cultural Identity, X2=Destination Image

The mediation analysis in Table 7 reveals that the experience economy significantly mediates the relationships between both cultural identity and destination image with behavioral intentions. Specifically, the indirect effect of cultural identity on behavioral intentions through the experience economy is 0.21 ($t = 6.429$, $p < 0.001$), with a 95% confidence interval of 0.152 to 0.28, indicating a robust and statistically significant mediation. Similarly, the indirect effect of destination image through the experience economy is 0.191 ($t = 6.226$, $p < 0.001$), with a 95% confidence interval of 0.134 to 0.255, also confirming significant mediation. Notably, while both effects are substantial, cultural identity exhibits a slightly stronger indirect influence on behavioral intentions compared to destination image.

Table 7.
The Mediating Effect of Experience Economy.

path	O	M	STDEV	T	P	2.50%	97.50%
CI -> EE -> TI	0.21	0.211	0.033	6.429	0.000	0.152	0.28
DI -> EE -> TI	0.191	0.192	0.031	6.226	0.000	0.134	0.255

Note: O=Original sample, M=Sample mean, STDEV=Standard deviation, T=T statistics ($|O/STDEV|$).

The path model illustrates the structural relationships among cultural identity, destination image, experience economy, and behavioral intentions. The findings indicate that both cultural identity and destination image exert significant positive effects on the experience economy, which in turn has a substantial influence on behavioral intentions. In addition, cultural identity and destination image also have direct effects on behavioral intentions. Overall, the results suggest that cultural identity and destination image influence behavioral intentions both directly and indirectly through the mediating role of the experience economy, with the model demonstrating strong explanatory power and acceptable measurement reliability.

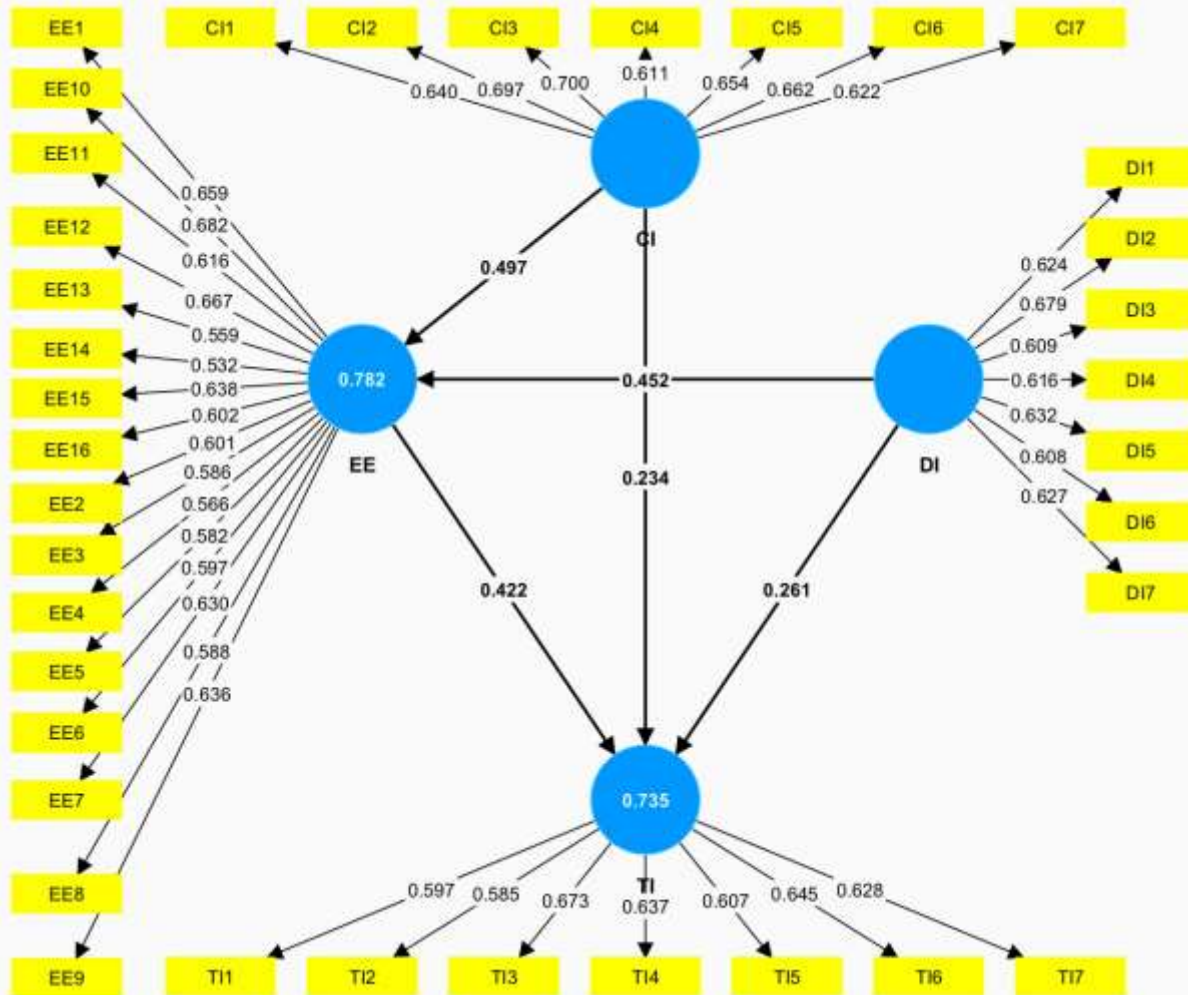


Figure 2.
SEM model of variables.

6.2. Discussion

The study's findings are consistent with existing tourism literature and the theoretical foundations of the SOR theory, confirming the significant roles of cultural identity, destination image, and the experience economy in shaping behavioral intentions. Quantitative results reveal that cultural identity and destination image are key predictors of tourists' intentions, and the experience economy also influences tourists' intentions. Moreover, the experience economy was found to exert a partial mediating effect between cultural identity, destination image, and behavioral intentions, suggesting that while cultural identity and destination image directly influence behavioral intentions, a substantial portion of their impact is transmitted through tourists' experiential perceptions. Methodological rigor is reflected in the use of structural equation modeling and reliability assessments, ensuring internal consistency. Nevertheless, the exclusive reliance on cross-sectional quantitative data and the absence of broader regional sampling limit the ability to capture longitudinal or cross-cultural variations. Overall, the study advances tourism research by empirically validating established theoretical models while also highlighting the need for future studies to incorporate more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and additional social and environmental variables to deepen understanding of tourist behavior.

The findings of this study confirm that both cultural identity and destination image are significant antecedents of behavioral intention in the context of cultural heritage tourism in Shandong Province. Importantly, the results highlight the mediating role of the Experience Economy, indicating that tourists' behavioral intentions are not only shaped directly by their cultural identification and perceptions of the destination but also indirectly through their experiential engagement. This aligns with the SOR framework, in which cultural cues (stimuli) influence tourists' experiential responses (organism), which subsequently determine behavioral outcomes (response).

The positive influence of cultural identity on behavioral intention supports previous research demonstrating that identification with cultural heritage fosters loyalty, revisit intention, and advocacy [3, 7]. However, the mediation results extend this literature by showing that cultural identity alone is insufficient to guarantee behavioral responses. Instead, identity translates into action primarily when tourists experience the destination as entertaining, educational, aesthetically pleasing, and immersive. This finding responds to calls in recent studies to examine why cultural identity sometimes exhibits weak or inconsistent effects, suggesting that the quality of the experiential process is a critical mechanism [16].

Similarly, the significant role of destination image reinforces prior evidence that favorable perceptions of a destination enhance revisit and recommendation behaviors [4, 8]. Yet, as with cultural identity, the mediation analysis reveals that these effects are intensified when the image is translated into positive experiential outcomes. This helps reconcile contradictory findings in the literature, where destination image did not always exert direct effects [18]. In the Shandong context, the heritage sites' ability to deliver aesthetic and immersive experiences appears to be a decisive factor in converting positive images into future behavioral intentions.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to tourism literature in three key ways. First, it extends the SOR model by explicitly operationalizing the Experience Economy (4Es) as the organismic mediator, rather than relying solely on general constructs such as satisfaction or experience quality. This provides a more nuanced account of how different experiential realms channel the effects of identity and image. Second, it enriches debates on the role of cultural identity, showing that its effect is conditional on experiential engagement, which may explain previous inconsistent findings. Third, it advances destination image research by demonstrating that the translation of image into behavior is experiential rather than automatic, thereby clarifying mixed evidence on direct versus mediated effects.

Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for heritage tourism managers in Shandong Province. Strengthening cultural identity cues (e.g., through heritage storytelling, symbolic interpretation, and community involvement) can encourage tourists to internalize local cultural meanings. However, such cues must be orchestrated into compelling experiences across the four realms of the Experience Economy. For instance, heritage sites could integrate entertainment through performances and interactive exhibitions, provide educational components via guided interpretation and digital apps, enhance aesthetic quality through preservation and landscape design, and foster escapism by offering immersive rituals or augmented reality tours. Similarly, marketing strategies should not only project a favorable image of Shandong but also ensure that the on-site experience substantiates that image, thereby reinforcing revisit and recommendation behaviors.

This research reflection underscores both the strengths and limitations of investigating cultural identity, destination image, experience economy, and behavioral intentions through a quantitative design based on 387 respondents. While the study provides valuable empirical evidence and situates its findings within the SOR framework, its generalizability is restricted by purposive sampling limited to Shandong Province, which may introduce regional bias, the use of a cross-sectional design that prevents examination of changes over time, and reliance on self-reported data that raises the possibility of response bias. Furthermore, the absence of qualitative insights and the limited integration of alternative theoretical perspectives, such as tourist motivation or contextual influences, constrain the depth of interpretation. Despite these limitations, the study highlights the importance of destination image and experiential quality in shaping behavioral intentions and provides a foundation for future research that

adopts more diverse samples, longitudinal approaches, and enriched theoretical frameworks to better capture the dynamic and multifaceted nature of cultural heritage tourism.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how cultural identity and destination image influence behavioral intention in the context of cultural heritage tourism in Shandong Province, China, with the Experience Economy framework serving as a mediating construct within the Stimulus–Organism–Response model. The findings demonstrate that while identity and image exert direct positive effects on tourists' behavioral intentions, their influence is significantly amplified when channelled through experiential engagement across the four realms of entertainment, education, esthetics, and escapism.

Theoretically, this research advances tourism literature by positioning the Experience Economy not only as a predictor but also as a mediating mechanism, thereby offering a more nuanced explanation for how cultural and perceptual cues are transformed into behavioral outcomes. It further clarifies mixed findings in previous studies on cultural identity and destination image by highlighting the centrality of experiential processes.

Practically, the results underscore the importance of designing and managing heritage experiences that integrate the four experiential realms. For destination managers in Shandong, this means ensuring that identity cues and image-building efforts are substantiated by engaging, aesthetically appealing, and immersive experiences that inspire loyalty and advocacy.

In conclusion, the study affirms that identity and image create the potential for loyalty, but it is experience that converts this potential into intention. Future research may extend this work by testing the model across different cultural settings, employing longitudinal designs, or incorporating immersive technologies such as AR and VR to further explore how experiences mediate the pathway from cultural cues to tourist behavior.

8. Recommendation

Governments should position cultural heritage as a core element of national or regional identity through strategic branding, public awareness campaigns, and immersive cultural events such as festivals, interactive museums, and heritage-based activities. These initiatives can foster pride among citizens, attract both domestic and international visitors, and strengthen the emotional and cultural value of heritage sites. Robust branding strategies highlighting unique cultural attributes, coupled with policies that balance economic development with heritage preservation, are essential for building a positive destination image and ensuring long-term sustainability. Such measures should be supported by the protection of heritage sites, regulation of tourism flows, and the promotion of responsible travel practices to safeguard cultural resources and deliver enduring benefits to local communities.

For businesses, including tourism operators, heritage site managers, and travel agencies, the priority is to develop immersive and authentic experiences that meet tourists' emotional and educational needs by enabling deep engagement with the cultural, historical, and social dimensions of destinations. The use of technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) can enhance these experiences by offering innovative ways to interact with cultural content. Collaboration with local communities is essential to ensure that tourism products authentically reflect the destination's cultural identity, with the involvement of local artisans, performers, and historians helping to preserve heritage and generate economic benefits. Furthermore, tailoring offerings to specific market segments, such as heritage tourists or cultural explorers, and understanding their motivations can strengthen the emotional and cultural appeal of tourism products, thereby attracting and retaining visitors seeking educational and culturally enriching experiences.

For individuals, it is recommended that tourists actively engage in cultural heritage tourism that resonates with their personal cultural identity. Participating in authentic cultural experiences allows tourists to deepen their understanding of cultural diversity, enhance their sense of identity, and contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage [26]. Travelers should also embrace responsible

tourism practices by respecting local traditions and minimizing environmental impact, which will help preserve cultural heritage sites for future generations. Prioritizing authentic, local experiences over mass-market tourism allows individuals to establish a deeper connection to the destination and its cultural heritage. By supporting local businesses and exploring off-the-beaten-path heritage sites, tourists can contribute to the economic development of local communities while enriching their travel experiences.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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